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National Modernism in Post-Revolutionary Society

The Ukrainian Renaissance and Jewish Revival, 1917–1930

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In the early twentieth century two stateless peoples, Ukrainians and Jews, struggled to establish their cultural and political identities. Both were heavily concentrated in two mutually bordering empires—the Austro-Hungarian and Russian. Their increasing assertiveness during this time expressed itself in a growing number of publications, and a sharper focus in their literature and art on national self-representation and self-definition. One reflection of this assertiveness was the promotion of an identity that combined a modernist style with elements of the national tradition, a development that arguably reached its peak in Ukraine in the years immediately following the 1917 Revolution. Revolutionary Ukrainian society—first the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) in the years 1917–1920 and then the Soviet Ukrainian state from 1923 onward—conducted a policy of Ukrainianization that created what is often referred to as "the cultural renaissance." Simultaneously the Jewish Kultur-Lige, which was headquartered in Kiev, pioneered a Jewish "cultural revival." The two movements were connected: both came out of the Ukrainian Revolution, and both embraced modernism (often in its most radical, avant-garde forms). The emergence of this "national modernism" was an important aspect of post-revolutionary life, and one that offers the possibility of reconceptualizing cultural developments in the 1920s.

The collapse of the tsarist state provided Ukrainian and Jewish intellectuals with a hitherto unavailable opportunity to explore and develop the idea of their cultural uniqueness. At the same time, the rapid pace of revolutionary transformations demanded an immediate and radical reimagining of all identities, including the national-cultural. When Mykola Khvyl'ovy formed his organization VAPLITE (an acronym for "Free Academy of Proletarian Literature")

and initiated the great Literary Discussion of 1925–1927, his aim was to accelerate the Ukrainianization process, which had been proclaimed by the Soviet Ukrainian government in 1923 and which, he felt, had stalled. But it was also to promote a new Ukrainian identity. How to achieve both these aims is the question that dominates his polemical pamphlets and fiction.[1] These writings represent one of the best expressions of the yearning for the new in the literature of the '20s, and inspired a vigorous debate over the future of Ukrainian culture. Khvyl′ovy argued that the culture had to be modern, European, and had to chart a course of its own, independent of Russia. This last, controversial call to escape Russian cultural hegemony has attracted most of the critical and scholarly attention, while the party's decision to close down the debate, VAPLITE's dissolution, and the writer's suicide in 1933 inevitably made him a martyr in the eyes of many commentators. By contrast, his attitude toward modernism's aesthetic of rupture and renewal and its promise of a new community has been understudied.

Khvyl′ovy produced daring, innovative work in the immediate post-revolutionary years, especially two collections of short stories *Syni etiudy* (*Blue Etudes,* 1923) and *Osin′* (*Autumn,* 1924). They already show evidence that the nation-building imperative, especially the articulation of a new national identity, was pulling him, as it was other writers (such as Pavlo Tychyna, the major poet of these years) toward historical allusions and narratives that could serve as allegories of the nation's fate. As a result, Khvyl′ovy, like most other "revolutionary" writers, found himself elaborating a modernist sensibility that both rejected traditionalism and continually invented ways of including and reconfiguring elements of the same national tradition. The ambivalent tone of these early stories emerges from the attempt to reconcile rejection of the past with historical references, to balance the rational with the intuitive, and to make the urban, as opposed to the rural, the stylistic matrix of a new culture.

World revolution was linked to the dream of modernity, access to the wider world, and to the triumph of justice. Many young people, such as Lev Kopelev, imagined that this world would have "no borders, no capitalists and no fascists at all," and that Moscow, Kharkiv, and Kiev "would become just as enormous, just as well built, as Berlin, Hamburg, New York," with skyscrapers, airplanes and dirigibles, streets full of automobiles and bicycles, workers and peasants in fine clothes, wearing hats and watches.[2] Kopelev's picture of the future was based on the assumption that modernity would be culturally Russian, perhaps uniformly so. These sentiments were echoed by others. Benedikt Livshits has described how he thought of David Burliuk and the early futurists: "[They] had destroyed poetical and painterly traditions and had founded a new aesthetics as stateless Martians, unconnected in any way with any nationality, much less with our planet."[3] Khvyl′ovy described the early post-revolutionary years differently: "Some kind of joyful alarm grips my heart. I see my descendants and see with what envy they look at me—a contemporary and eyewitness of my Eurasian renaissance. Just think, only a few years and such achievements. . . . What wonderful prospects appear in the future for this country, when these courageous innovators finally overcome the inertia of the centuries."[4] It was not material but cultural achievements that inspired him, and his focus was not on some abstract, borderless, geographical space, but on Ukraine ("this country") as the trailblazer of a new culture ("my Eurasian renaissance"). However, his excitement and fervor resemble Kopelev's. In his memoirs another Ukrainian writer of the '20s, Yurii Smolych, reflects this fervent faith in the arrival of the new: "This generation was called to liquidate the ruins of the war period and to create the first beginnings of the new way of life. And this took place at the break of two epochs—the destruction of the old worldly, reactionary norms and customs and the search for new customs and norms."[5]

What fascinates in this creative excitement is the combination of the revolutionary and national. A vehement rejection of the past was linked to the belief that the modern would be built on the release of long-suppressed, untapped national energies. The structure of Khvylovy's stories is built on this kind of "argument." His protagonists have often emerged from the whirlwind of revolutionary ideas and find themselves thrown into confusion by the horrors of the revolution. They are dissatisfied with revolutionary society, but find no inspiration in the prerevolutionary world, which they associate with symbolism and aestheticism, particularly the search for self-knowledge and retreat from the world. These protagonists suffer from arrested inner growth. Divorced from their surroundings, they focus obsessively on a beautiful illusion—the distant future in which the dreams of many past generations will become reality. However, the path to this future is blocked. The vision recedes year after year, and is eventually entirely blotted out by the corruptions of urban civilization. People from the countryside who have thrown in their lot with the revolution bring freshness, innocence, and idealism to the construction of revolutionary society, but soon succumb to the city's sterility and cynicism. Their vitality and excitement are extinguished. The loss of faith is caused in large part by the blocking of the national cultural movement, which authorities treat as something embarrassing or even evil. As a result, Ukrainian protagonists develop a feeling of self-hatred. The same message is carried in his polemical pamphlets, in which Khvyl′ovy challenged young people to create a cultural renaissance.

There is an underlying pull of mythic structures in the stories and pamphlets: illusions are destroyed by reality, heroism is disappointed by cowardice, and idealism is stifled by cynicism. Because of this, the stories can be given allegorical or symbolic readings, to which the pamphlets hold the interpretative key. The individual who is unable to tell his story openly can be seen as the nation that is not allowed to express itself, whose dream of cultural development has been dashed. In this way, the fictional works recount a familiar tale of national oppression and the need for emancipation, albeit in a fragmented and mysteriously allusive modernist style.

Nonetheless, the writer remained a caustic critic of conservative and populist views. He probed darkness at the heart of the village idyll, explored disturbing and anarchic forces in the human psyche, and exposed clichés such as romantic love. Like much of the literature and art of the early post-revolutionary period, Khvyl′ovy's writings show an aversion to populism and a refusal to embrace ethnographic traditions uncritically. Inspired by a vision of a blended social and national liberation, and by the prospect of introducing a new Ukrainian culture onto the world stage, his writings draw sustenance from the palingenetic myth (the idea of rebirth, regeneration, revival) that has been widely observed in twentieth-century modernism. The crucial concept is that of genesis. Both artists and writers sought to identify key elements out of which the culture had been formed. Thus the writers who contributed to the *Vaplite* journal and to the next journal formed by Khvyl′ovy, *Literaturnyi iarmarok* (December 1928–February 1930) searched for elements of the cultural code that represented the national experience and identity as it had evolved over the centuries. They examined archetypal forms, characters, canonical images and works, and then recoded these into a new format and a new identity. Abstraction and the investigation of fundamental concepts played an important role—whether in literature, painting, or theatre. The search for the "grammatical structure" of national identity became analogous to experimentation with pure color and form in painting, or with the search for basic patterns of sound and meaning in poetry, which were also typical of the avant-garde in the twenties. It was thought that, once discovered, these basic elements could by some mysterious alchemy be transformed into a new synthesis.

Others negotiated attitudes to the past in similarly ambiguous ways. The example of art is particularly instructive. Alexandra Exter's studio in Kiev in the years 1917–1920 was a good example of the modernist transformation of tradition. It blended cubo-futurism, constructivism, and folk-primitivism in innovative ways. Her interest in arts and crafts at this time led to collaboration with artists like Evheniia Prybyl′s′ka and Nina Henke, who developed workshops in which local women mass-produced textiles and other products using patterns inspired both by folk motifs and by Suprematist art. These were shown in major exhibitions in Moscow and Paris to great acclaim. Exter's studio educated many important artists, including leading Jewish figures like Boris Aronson, Isaak Rabinovich, Nisson Shifrin, and Oleksandr (Aleksandr) Tyshler, and was visited by many figures from Moscow and Petrograd who found themselves in Kiev at the time, such as Illia Ehrenburg, Benedikt Livshits, Osip Mandelshtem, Viktor Shklovsky, and Natan Vengrov. Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist art can also be seen as a kind of recreation in an abstract and mystical key of the ancient and ethnographic; and Mykhailo Boichuk's monumentalist or neo-Byzantinist school also turned to national sources in its search for primitive, ethnographic, or folk features. This school came out of the thrilling "rediscovery" in prerevolutionary years of the icon as not only a popular but also a sophisticated form that could be linked to cubist and avant-garde experimentation. The artist turned to the icon and folk arts for national forms, and attempted to crystallize these traditional elements into a modern synthesis and a national style. Other artists, who were not part of the avant-garde, were also feeding this interest in the past. Hryhorii Narbut and Vasyl Krychevs′ky, for example, were famous for translating ornamental images into modern graphic art, particularly in book design: Narbut reworked baroque images and Krychevs′ky folk art patterns. Like the "national modernist" writers grouped around Khvyl′ovy, they were guided by a desire to give old, often very ancient forms a new expression.

These writers and artists felt no dichotomy between "ethnic loyalty" and participation in international modernism. Their interest in the traditional aimed at uncovering deeper generative principles. Figures like Alexander Archipenko, Kazimir Malevich, Alexandra Exter, and David Burliuk succeeded in bringing their discoveries to the international community. Like these artists, writers did not desire to remain strictly within the limits of their particular national tradition, but recognized the dialectical relationship between the national and international.

Abstracting, translating, or transforming tradition into modernist form became something of an obsession in Ukrainian culture in the following decades, and a major part of the continuing search for self-definition. In the forties, for example, Sviatoslav Hordyns′ky, an artist, poet, and critic who began exhibiting and writing in L′viv (then part of the Polish state) in the thirties before moving to the United States, contributed an article to *Ukrainske mystetstvo: Almanakh II* (*Ukrainian Art: Almanac II*) in which he argued for an abstract national art in terms very close to those used in the early twenties. He wrote that international modernism's interest in form had compelled twentieth-century Ukrainian artists to abandon historical styles and genre painting and forced them to study the compositional techniques and colors of their own popular traditions. The "strong, formalist features of the old Ukrainian art, its anti-naturalism" allowed them to create in an abstract manner that simultaneously echoed traditional forms.[6] He singled out Boichuk's school of the 1920s as an exemplary synthesis of traditionalism and formalism, and thought that the search for this synthesis continued to drive many contemporary artists.

A comparison with the key concepts of the Jewish revival is revealing. In the years 1918–1920 Kiev's Kultur-Lige championed the idea of a secular Yiddish culture that would be international and modern. Created on 9 January 1918, the organization had established 120 branches throughout Ukraine by the end of the year. Eponymous organizations were created in Petrograd, the Crimea, Minsk, Grodny, Vilnius, Bialystok, Chernowets (Romania; today's Chernivtsi in Ukraine), Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, and the far-eastern cities of Chita, Irkutsk, and Harbin. When at the end of 1920 the Kiev center came under Bolshevik control, some members left in order to reproduce the organization in Warsaw in 1921 and Berlin in 1922. A Kultur-Lige was created in Riga (Latvia) in 1922, New York and Chicago in 1926, Bucharest in 1931, and Mexico and Argentina in 1935. The Ukrainian organization was the largest and strongest in the years 1918–1920, and provided the model for developments elsewhere. Claims were made for its having "four evening folk universities, twelve grammar schools, twenty large libraries with reading rooms, seventy kindergartens and orphanages, forty evening programs, ten playing fields, three gymnasiums [high schools], twenty dramatic circles, choruses, and troupes."[7] The organization opened art studios, an art museum, a teachers' seminary, and a Jewish People's University. In 1918 its press accounted for over 40 percent of all titles in Yiddish produced in the lands of the former empire.[8] The literary section included leading modernists like Yehezkiel Dobrushin, Dovyd Bergelson, Der Nister (Pinkhas Kaganovich), Dovyd Gofshteyn, Leib Kvitko, and Nakhman Maizil, while its artistic section boasted many outstanding avant-gardists like Aronson, Tyshler, Rabinovich, Mark Epshtein, Solomon Nikritin, Abram Manevych, Isaak Rabichev, and Issachar-Ber Ryback. Other artists like El (Eliezer) Lissitzky, Sarra Shor, Joseph Chaikov, David Shterenberg, Polina Khentova, and Mark Sheikhel moved to Kiev to join the movement. Marc Chagall contributed illustrations to its publications. Kiev in fact became the center of an international Jewish avant-garde art. The book graphic art produced in these years is today universally admired precisely for the blending of modernism and national tradition that it was able to achieve. Two major art exhibitions were held in Kiev (in 1920 and 1922) and another in New York (in 1924).

Kultur-Lige's growth and the Jewish cultural revival took place against the background of the 1917–1920 Revolution. The revolutionary Ukrainian government (initially the Central Rada, later the Ukrainian National Republic or UNR) approved a multicultural policy, offering support in particular to the Jewish, Polish, and Russian minorities. They were granted cultural autonomy, representation at the ministerial level, and state funding for cultural development. The Rada was aware that the urban population was often less than one-third Ukrainian (with Russian, Jews, or Poles making up the majority) and sought an alliance with the Jewish population to bolster its support in crucial urban areas. The Ukrainian intelligentsia saw Jewish cultural development as an ally in the struggle to reverse the process of Russification that was tsarism's legacy.

The Kultur-Lige was formed in Kiev a day before the UNR's law on national-personal autonomy was proclaimed on 9 January 1918. The organization's statute was approved on 15 January. Its creation was supported by a coalition of Jewish socialist parties: the Bund, Fareinigte, Poale Zion, and Folkspartei (United Jewish Socialist Workers' Party). Since Moisei Zilberfarb, the Central Rada's Minister of Jewish Affairs, was in the Kultur-Lige's leadership, the organization was effectively an auxiliary organ of the Ministry. The Kultur-Lige continued to expand its activities under Hetmanate rule (from April to November 1918 Pavlo Skoropadky ruled as Hetman with German backing), when it "assumed the role of the organ of Jewish autonomy in Ukraine."[9] At this time it created the university, including a major library and a

program of extramural education. The university began operating after a circular on national higher education allowing "teaching in the languages used in schools" was promulgated on 5 August by the Minister of Education and Art. When the UNR government returned to Kiev under the leadership of the Directory (November 1918–January 1919), lecturers from the Kultur-Lige's teacher-training school in Kiev formed the Department of Education in its Ministry of Jewish Affairs. The Kultur-Lige therefore embodied the concept of cultural autonomy under successive Ukrainian governments, receiving financial support from them, while at the same time also raising its own funds. In 1918 it employed around 260 people, and of the 21 individuals on its governing board three were ministers in the governments of the UNR. When the organization was brought under the control of the Communist Party in December 1920, the original leadership was squeezed out. By 1922 all branches throughout Ukraine had been subordinated to the Evsektsii (the Jewish Sections of the Commissariat of Education). Initially the Bolsheviks supported aspects of the Kultur-Lige's work, such as the university and theatres, but the Jewish sections of the Bolshevik Party argued that the Kultur-Lige was a class enemy and nationalist. More to the point, the Kultur-Lige presented a rival to the Jewish sections, which wanted exclusive control over organized Jewish cultural life.[10] The collapse of the UNR government was accompanied by the terrible wave of pogroms in 1919, in which troops ostensibly loyal to this government participated. These pogroms did much to destroy the Ukrainian–Jewish rapprochement, and encouraged some Jews to support the Bolsheviks.

In spite of its short existence, the Kultur-Lige achieved astonishing successes, including the development of a network of Jewish schools throughout Ukraine, a flowering of Yiddish literature, and the creation of an avant-garde art of international fame. Even after the Soviet takeover, many aspects of its work continued under other names. The music school was sponsored by a trade union organization; the major library in Kiev continued to function under other names; the art school was active until 1931; the Kultur-Lige's Jewish theatre began working in Kharkiv in 1924; and the publishing house continued using the organization's name until the end of the twenties.

It is hard to convey today how thrilling the vision of a cultural rebirth was to participants. In his memoirs Arthur Golomb, who lived in Kiev in the years 1917–1921 describes how in January of 1918, as the Bolsheviks began to sow disorder in Kiev and the Red Army commenced an artillery bombardment of the Ukrainian capital from the left bank of the Dnipro, he was running down the street to the Jewish student kitchen when he met Zelig Melamed, who called out: "It's ready!" He had in his pocket the statute of the Kultur-Lige. Both friends were so excited by the news that they stood up, entirely forgetting the danger and ignoring the flying bullets and the roar of the cannonade.[11]

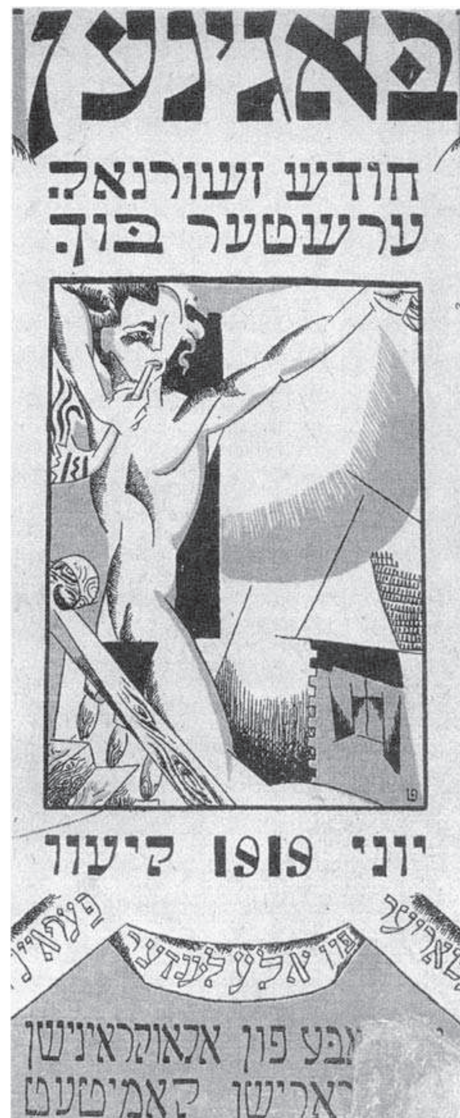
The organization saw Yiddish, the language spoken by most Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, as the "natural" expression of Jewish life, and support for Yiddish as a turn to the creativity of the masses. It aimed at the creation of a new culture that would synthesize the universal and national, and that would unite the diaspora "from Moscow to New York and from London to Johannesburg," giving Yiddish-speaking Jews, who had no country of their own, a spiritual home wherever they found themselves.

The new culture was to be modern. For some this meant that it should be politically leftist and activist. Perets Markish, a leading figure in Kiev's Yiddish revival, who moved to Warsaw and then to Moscow in the thirties, was remarkably pro-Soviet, even after the regime repressed the Kultur-Lige. However, other members of the organization were not. When the Kiev organization was shut down, some of the main figures like I. I. Zinger, Moisei

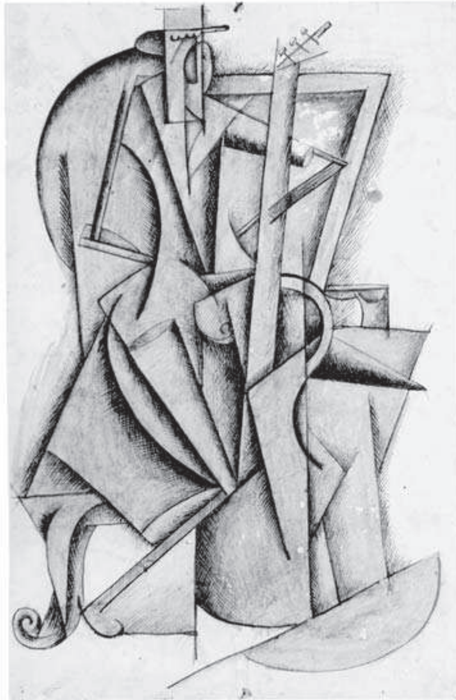
Zilberfarb, Zelig Melamed, and Nakhmen Mayzel Maizil moved to Warsaw, hoping that this city would become the base of a Yiddish cultural flowering and that Jews in Poland would be granted the same cultural autonomy as they had received from the Ukrainian government.[12] Here, and wherever the members of the Kiev Kultur-Lige moved, they promoted their dream of a new but archetypically Jewish culture, a national sensibility that was modern (even avant-gardist), secular, progressive, and global.

The artistic section perhaps provided the clearest expression of national modernist theory and style. Several artists had been involved in the search for cultural roots in the prerevolutionary years. Natan Altman had in 1913 copied ancient tombstones on Jewish cemeteries in Shepetivka; Isakhar-Ber Rybak and El Lissitsky had in 1915 made drawings of the interiors of ancient synagogues in Right-Bank Ukraine; Solomon Yudovkin had taken over 1,500 photographs of *pinkas* (Jewish community books); Chaikov, Elman, and Kratko had studied Jewish embossed silver. The motivation in each case was the development of an art that drew on tradition in order to rework archetypal forms. In the Kultur-Lige period these same artists attempted to translate the traditional into an avant-garde idiom with the idea of abstract form as its purest expression. The approach was defended by Boris Aronson and Isakhar-Ber Rybak in an influential article published in 1919 in the Kiev journal *Oyfgang* (*Dawn*), which criticized the idea of an art focused on recognizably Jewish themes. Instead, the authors argued, the national could best be explored by examining formal qualities, such as the use of color and rhythm, and traditional ornamental patterns. The ensuing discussion on this subject evolved into an entire discourse in which Jewish journals in Berlin, Moscow, Lodz, and Vilnius participated.

Aronson developed this view in *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* (*Contemporary Jewish Graphic Art,* 1924), which he published in Berlin. He elaborated the concept of a Jewish art based on specifically Jewish forms of ornamentation, compositional qualities, and archetypal imagery, all



Joseph Chaikov, cover for *Baginen* (Beginnings), no. 1 (Kiev, 1919). Located in Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaisme, Paris.



Mark Epstein, "The Cellist" (also called "Cubist Composition"), 1920. Epstein was a product of the O. Murashko and the A. Exter studios in Kyiv. He was a leader of the Kultur-Lige's art section in Kyiv and illustrated many of its books. The National Museum of Art, Kyiv. From Hillel Kazovsky, ed., *Kultur-Lige: Artistic Avant-Garde of the 1920s and the 1930s* (Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2007), p. 88.

of which, he felt, could already be found "in the distant sources of ethnography and in the first manuscript publications of sacred books."[13] A Jewish art, in his opinion, could be distilled from the entire range of objects that were used in rituals and daily life. However, the distillation could not be mere copying or stylization; it had to be a new individualization, as practiced by artists like Altman and Chagall, who had shown how popular elements could be transformed into unique and original combinations. By the time the book appeared, Aronson already felt that the search for a new national style had failed. Not only had the Kiev Kultur-Lige's great experiment been cut short, but a different artistic sensibility was ascendant—one that stressed dynamism, mechanics, and fragmentation, and seemed to deny the possibility of stable, recurring forms. However, he still claimed "one priceless achievement" for the earlier inspiration: "it enlivened a whole range of historical materials, blew the dust from the living face of grave stones, animated with warmth the relations between tradition and craft."[14] The traditional and ethnographic, he still maintained, could be reworked into a modernist idiom. In fact this combination was now in vogue, since primitivism had been widely embraced as one of modernism's programmatic features.

John Bowlt has emphasized the contradiction between loyalty to the community and commitment to the international art world, arguing that the attempt to create an international style in architecture and the plastic arts had to win out. According to him, these artists

> . . . [sympathized] with the sincere attempts of their linguistic colleagues to accelerate the application of Esperanto. In the immediate context of Jewish art and the Russian avant-garde, this argument held a particular logic: few modern Jewish artists derived all their artistic inspiration from the patriarchal traditions of Jewish culture observed in the tortured environment of the shtetl, although, certainly, Chagall, Ryback, and Yudovkin did. In many cases, they attempted to interweave these traditions with the aesthetic systems of Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, etc.[15]

This line of argumentation misses a crucial point: for many of these artists the road to an international style or abstraction passed through the national. After all, why should this route be any less acceptable than the exploration of "exotic" African or Polynesian art?

In the early Kultur-Lige years Aronson felt that Jewish folk traditions could be fused with contemporary art "to create a modern Jewish plastic art which seeks its own organic national form, color and rhythm."[16] This suggested a Jewish path to abstraction. Rybak and Aronson in the above-mentioned article of 1919 argued that even if the artist's work was successful internationally, it would still reveal the specific spiritual construction and emotions of the creator's milieu and the national element in its style, structure, and organization. However, at the same time, these leaders of Kultur-Lige believed that "traditional shtetl life was atrophied and a modern, secular, national culture should replace it. The role of art was to give aesthetic definition to new national and cultural longings."[17] Under the impact of Bolshevik pressure, the emphasis on national specificity was gradually removed. Abstraction came to mean not the refinement of a particular tradition, but the erasure of recognizable traditions and the embracing instead of a universalism that masked or denied national specificity.

The practical application of these theoretical premises can be seen in the work of many artists. Mark Epstein's cubist compositions, such as *The Cello-Player* (1920) and *Family Group* (1919–1920), or Joseph Chaikov's *The Seamstress* (1922), *Soyfer* (*The Scribe,* 1922), and *The Violin-Player* (1922) treat traditional themes in a Cubist manner. Rybak's decorative forms, such as his *Sketch for the Almanac Eygns* (Native, 1920) give a modern graphic interpretation of the forms he had copied from synagogue murals and carved tombstones. And the now famous book illustrations from 1917–1924 by El Lissitsky, Rybak, and Sarra Shor represent an avant-garde graphic art inspired by Jewish folk arts. These represented not a clash between the old and new, but a new aesthetic consciousness created by mingling tradition and modernism. There were, of course, works in which the tension between the old and new worlds was emphasized, as in Joseph Chaikov's image for the cover of the magazine *Baginen* (*Beginnings,* 1919). It depicts the artist with one eye open to the future and a second closed to the past, blind to the rural world he has left behind.[18]

The theorizing of the Ukrainian "renaissance" and the Jewish "revival" throw light on both movements. The literature and art of one finds analogous works in the other. This is to be expected, since there were often strong bonds between individuals in both groups, and both movements were inspired by the international avant-garde. Many artists had spent time abroad (especially in Paris, Munich, and Berlin) in prerevolutionary years. They had often come through the same art schools, in particular the Kiev Art School, Oleksandr Murashko's Art School, Alexandra Exter's studio, and Boichuk's studio of monumental art in the Ukrainian Academy of Arts (an institution that went through two name changes in the 1920s). They exhibited together in the earliest avant-garde exhibitions within the Russian empire (in Kiev, Moscow, and Petrograd) and continued to work together, both in the years 1917–1924, when the Kultur-Lige was most active, and later.

There were also numerous contacts between Ukrainian and Jewish writers at this time. Pavlo Tychyna and Leib Kvitko are a frequently cited example. Tychyna learned Yiddish and translated Kvitko's verse into Ukrainian, while Kvitko translated Tychyna into Yiddish. Tychyna's successful translation initiated translations into Russian and over 20 other languages. By the end of the thirties a hundred books by Kvitko had appeared in Yiddish, along with 30 translations each in Ukrainian and Russian. The author's works would disappear from bookstores and libraries when he was arrested and killed in 1952. Kvitko was also a member of VAPLITE, and, like Khvyl′ovy, made a spirited criticism of the Communist Party's control of literature in 1929. Yurii Smolych was a close friend of the Yiddish writer Der Nister (Pinkhus Kahanovych). Both came from Western Ukraine. During the 1905 pogrom, Smolych's fam-

ily hid some Jewish families. In the twenties Smolych and Der Nister regularly attended and discussed Yiddish and Ukrainian theater performances. In his memoirs written in the sixties the Ukrainian writer looks back fondly on this time, although in order to please the censors his account alternatively veers between supporting non-Russian cultures and denouncing any attachment to them as "nationalistic." Even this carefully filtered version was criticized. One editor insisted that Smolych expunge his call for a revival of Jewish theater in Ukraine, reports of Der Nister's negative attitude toward the creation of the Birobidzhan Jewish autonomous region, and complaints about Soviet antisemitism.[19]

A third frequently cited friendship is that between the outstanding theatre director Les Kurbas and the famous actor Solomon Mikhoels. In 1933, Kurbas was dismissed from the innovative Berezil theatre in Kharkiv, which he had taken from success to success for over a decade. Mikhoels invited him to work in Moscow's GOSET (State Jewish Theater). Kurbas, who spoke Yiddish and had long maintained close contacts with Jewish theatres, enjoyed this collaboration, which produced *King Lear,* one of the great Shakespeare productions of the 1930s. Even though he was arrested on 26 December 1933 on his way to rehearsals, the production that premiered on 10 February 1935, with Mikhoels in a starring role, bore Kurbas's imprint.[20] Kurbas was shot in a labor camp in 1937, Mikhoels in 1952.

In his memoirs Smolych argues that in the twenties many Jews were "native speakers" of Ukrainian. They came from small Ukrainian towns and villages, and had only a faulty knowledge of Russian. The post-Stalin generation of Jews, according to Smolych, grew up without speaking Ukrainian and was prejudiced against the language. "Along the way," he writes, "we lost a good colleague in our cultural process."[21] In the twenties many Jews made major contributions to the development of Ukrainian literature, art, cinema, and scholarship. Olena Kurylo, a leading linguist, was an expert on Ukrainian dialects and folklore, and helped to codify the orthography in 1928–1929. Osyp Hermaize was a prominent historian and became one of the 45 accused in the great SVU (Union for the Liberation of Ukraine) show-trial of 1930, which was accompanied by the arrest of thousands of Ukrainian intellectuals. (The SVU, a supposed terrorist organization, was entirely dreamed up by the secret police.) Abram Leites, Samiilo Shchupak, Volodymyr Koriak, and Yarema Aizenshtok were leading critics. The first produced an important bibliography and anthology of critical materials that for many decades remained the best source on the writers of the twenties; the last prepared the complete edition of Shevchenko's diary, as well as numerous studies of Ukrainian writers and folklore. Accused of Ukrainian nationalism, he was forced to move to Leningrad.[22] Numerous writers of Jewish origin made names for themselves in Ukrainian literature in the twenties. The most prominent among them were Leonid Pervomaisky (Illia Hurevych), Sava Holovanivsky, Ivan (Izrail) Kulyk, Aron Kopshtein, and Raisa Troianker.

National modernism as a literary and artistic current was strongly in evidence in the twenties, but was most forcefully articulated by Khvyl′ovy on behalf of VAPLITE and by Aronson on behalf of Kultur-Lige. The Ukrainian and Jewish modernists associated with these groups saw the new literature and art as an expression of national identity, and attempted to theorize it accordingly. Their rhetoric and imagery were often aggressive. They left no doubt that the past was guilty: it bore responsibility for the catastrophic present. However, they simultaneously argued that, because the tsarist past had oppressed, denied, or marginalized national culture, its repressed energies and unexplored potential could be used to create new, popular and progressive artistic forms. Utopianism and faith in the future were a part of this modernism, but the local was the vehicle for reaching this future.

In the twentieth century's early decades the explosion of modernity simultaneously transformed millions of Ukrainians and Jews in analogous ways. In response to this development, both national revivals aimed at developing secular cultures that accepted European genres and modes of discourse, but simultaneously infused them with elements of their own tradition. A key to understanding the semiotics of this art lies in the cultural discourse out of which it grew.

Notes

1. For pamphlets, see Mykola Khvylovy, *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine* (Alberta: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1986). A selection of his fiction has been translated in Mykola Khvylovy, *Stories from the Ukraine* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960).
2. Lev Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 183–84.
3. Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer* (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), 39.
4. Mykola Khvyl′ovy, "Une letter," *Nove mystetstvo* 26(10) (1926): 10.
5. Iurii Smolych, *Tvory u 8 t.,* vol. 8 (Kiev: Dnipro, 1986), 384.
6. Sviatoslav Hordyns′kyi, *Ukrainske mystetstvo: Almanakh II* (Munich: Spilka, 1947), 15.
7. *Der Fraytog,* 1 August 1919, 36, quoted in S. I. Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia," in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928,* ed. Ruth Apter-Gabriel (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1988), 35.
8. Apter-Gabriel has provided a bibliography, and those published in Ukraine are listed in M. O. Rybakov, *Pravda istorii: 'diial'nist 'ievrei'skoi kulturno-'prosvitnyts'koi orhanizatsii 'Kulturna liha' u Kyievi (1918–1925): Zbirnyk dokumentiv i materialiv,* 2nd ed. (Kiev, 2001), 163–64 and 176–87.
9. Hillel Kazovsky, ed., *Kultur-Lige: Artistic Avant-garde 1910–1920-kh rokiv* (Kiev: Dukh I litera, 2007), 27.
10. Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 273–76.
11. Kazovsky, ed., *Kultur-Lige,* 24–25.
12. Meilekh Ravich, "Kratkaia istoriia dinamicheskoi gruppy trekh poetoc v Varshave, 1921–1925," in Grigorii Kazovskii, *O 'Khaliastre,'* 8, available at: http: //members.tripod.com/~barabash/zerkalo/19-20/Kazovsky.htm (accessed 31 August 2008).
13. B. Aronson, *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* (Berlin: Petropolis, 1924), 24.
14. Ibid., 104.
15. J. Bowlt, "From the Pale of Settlement to the Reconstruction of the World?" in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928,* ed. Ruth Apter-Gabriel, (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1988), 45.
16. *Kultur-Lige Zamlung* (gazette), November 1919, 38; quoted in S. I. Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia" in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928,* ed. Ruth Apter-Gabriel (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1988), 35.
17. Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia," 36.
18. These works can be found in Kazovsky, *Kultur-Lige.* Epstein's *Cello-Player* and *Family Group* are reproduced on 88 and 89; Chaikov's *Seamstress, Soyfer,* and *Violin-Player* on 153–55; Rybak's *Sketch* on page 139; and the book illustrations by El Lissitsky, Rybak, and Sarra Shor on 111–23, 140–41, and 194–95, respectively; Chaikov's cover of *Baginen* is found on 52.
19. Tetiana Soloviova, "Memuaryst–Intelihent, humanist," *Prapor* 9 (1990): 175.
20. Irene Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 191–95.
21. Iurii Smolych, "Zapysiv na skhyli viku," *Prapor* 9 (1990): 161.
22. Valerian Revuts′kyi, "Zustrich z Iaremoiu Aizenshtokom," *Diialohy* 9–10 (1985): 164–65.